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Neither Here nor There: Culture Shock and Assimilation in College Students Studying Abroad

by Jillian Schwab, Arcadia University.

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

--T.S. Eliot

Foreword

One of my great envies and fascinations in life are people who live a life of transience. This entails frequent wanderlusts, expatriates, and students who study abroad. They each have their reasons for transplanting themselves from their home to a different soil. My own experiences in that third category are still nestling in every facet of my day-to-day. In the spring of 2014, I lived in Cork City, Ireland for about half a year, studying drama and theatre. The experience on the ground in this ancient marsh-land city is without words or expression. This is mostly due to the fact that I continue to process the full extent of what leaving my home meant. The only word that I can explicate those 6 months with is *seanchaí*. Irish for storyteller.

I returned to the United States to a single question from nearly all of my friends and loved ones: "What was it like?" This was followed by subsets of queries to the same effect; "Did you love it, what was your favorite (insert memory here), were you homesick?". Eventually, after hearing these questions in the 11 months since returning to Philadelphia, I had to settle on scripted answers. Truthfully, I still find myself unable to adequately answer these for myself. The impact of reverse culture shock was a sequela of re-acclimation, and the only cure is time. With time comes the stages of reflection. From that reflection come the stories.

In Ireland, I created an existence for myself that embodied an ideal of independence I had only dreamed of. I was pushed to standards and a level of maturity that terrified, romanced, and humbled me. I've also questioned my "place" in a new country in ways that truly threatened my

sense of self-worth. I lived a story and learned how to really tell my own. Placing my own sense of nationality and culture at a significant distance allowed me a new understanding of them.

The focus of this poetic inquiry is to bring culture shock to an understanding beyond words and into feeling. Attending an institution that strives to give its students a global perspective in their education, I sought to investigate how other students processed similar encounters with new places. A cornerstone of my investigation was to uncover the similarities and differences in cultural assimilation from the American and international perspective.

The poems resulting from this study represent the interviews of five students of varying cultural backgrounds and nationalities. Two of my participants are friends of mine who are also members of Arcadia's Theatre Department. The other three participants are immigrants to the United States. They are also Arcadia students that I have connected with through the Office of International Affairs, personal recommendation, and during a class of mine. I will not claim that the result of these interviews are a direct and full image of their internalized reactions to new countries. They only represent a version of that reality, influenced by my own interpretation. However, these poems do offer multifaceted insights into identity, place, self-growth, fear, triumph, and maturity.

Methodology

This study was spearheaded by my curiosity to develop a personal practice for poetic inquiry. Poetry is one of my chief grounding forces of creative expression. And, given the subjective nature of this qualitative data, the most accessible outlet for each of my participant's stories. Hearing this gamut of emotional growth from five different perspectives could not have been explained in a clinically objective way. In fact, it would have done my participants a disservice. Constantly encountering all things new and different, we first rely on our senses to decipher what is happening to us in the most visceral of ways. Often, the words don't occur to us until well after initial experiences. Poetry covers all the bases, so to speak, of what we can and can't explain at any point in time.

My methodology in approaching this work was born from auto-ethnographic methods of obtaining data via interviews and personal reflection entries in a field journal. I began with re-reading journal entries written during my own time abroad to recall my reflections at the time. Both positive and negative memories now seem completely different to me. I have had opportunity to digest the details of those stories and frame them in the larger context of an entire semester of living there. Unintentionally, measuring my own change of perspective from its immediate impact to the present became a focal point of this study. I wanted to uncover this same sort of digestion in other students at different points in their time abroad.

I conducted two in-person interviews and took copious field notes that reflected personal reactions, atmospheric details, questions for later use, and certain imagery that stuck out to me. Three other interviews were conducted via Facebook Chat messenger. I then combed through the transcripts and field notes, and cross-referenced them for prevailing themes, trends, and quotations that emphasized their modes of thought. I listened hard for moments of silence, while my interviewee gathered his/her thoughts. I also kept track of repeated turns of phrase, vocal and physical gestures, and anything that seemed unique to their personality.

The following chart is a demographic breakdown of my five participants. For ethical purposes, their identities will not be disclosed.

NATIONALITY	PLACE OF STUDY	GENDER	TIME SINCE LEAVING
Peruvian	USA (NYC and Glenside, PA)	Female	5 years
Burundian	USA (Glenside, PA)	Female	5 years
Iranian	USA (Glenside, PA and Washington DC)	Male	9 years
American	London, England (graduate student)	Female	9 months in grad school, one semester during undergrad
American	Varanasi, India	Male	3 months

It was integral during the writing process to maintain the echos of raw experience for each individual by using actual pieces of text, and using creative license to enhance sensory imagery. The way they colored that sensory experience in their own voice gave each poem its tone, shape, and personality.

In order to glean as much information as possible in the time I had with my participants, I prepared a basic outline of questions as “jumping-off-points”.

1. First of all, tell me city/town in which you're studying. Describe your surroundings in as many sensory details as possible, including the people and whatever unique qualities stick out for you.
2. Why did you choose to come here? Was it a last minute choice or have you always wanted to come here? What does this place give you that home cannot?
3. Tell me a brief story about a conversation or an experience you had with someone in this place.
4. What about this place did you not expect? What things did you expect?

5. What about yourself is being challenged here? How do you keep yourself grounded, and what risks have you taken?
6. In what ways do you feel different from when you first left?
7. What is one thing you had to leave behind?

I did not use every question with each of them, except for the first two in this list. I wanted to keep the vein of these interviews as conversational as possible and let their responses direct the course of my questioning. This helped me achieve valuable reciprocity that would otherwise be difficult to create in a more formal interview. All of my participants shared extremely personal information with me, information that had seldom been shared before. This was particularly empowering for my research, seeing as I had never met the international students portrayed in this study. We built a good rapport, mutually discussing our favorite and not-so-favorite memories in our travels.

Difficulties and Complications

From a logistical standpoint, coordinating time to speak with three of my participants abroad took longer than anticipated. I had expected to battle time zones and heavily booked schedules. They could only dedicate a restricted amount of time to speak with me. The use of social media was helpful in setting forth an informal tone to my conversations with these students. However, it was also limiting because I did not have the advantage of the in-person experience. Having a candid and present interaction elicits a vivid picture of who the subject really is, and I had to do without with some of my students. It presented a small hindrance in my writing process.

I did not record our conversation at the request of my Burundian participant. I worked strictly from my field notes, taking a detailed account of the arc of her story. She revealed to me a great deal of what has been a harrowing journey for her in coming to the United States from Burundi. This young woman, who is the same age as me, spoke to me of the oppression she and her family had suffered as refugees. She was of little words, but the years spoke loudly across her face. Having never experienced such turmoil, her quiet confidence and resolve intimidated me. Inside my own mind, I had no idea how to process what she was telling me, or if I even had a right to. I felt a sense of shame for not knowing how to react.

Being able to handle sensitive information with care necessitates a certain empathy. When I began this inquiry, I believed I could only give a paltry amount of it. I steered myself towards complete openness and trust of my own subjectivity with each of these students. After all, we all had went through very similar events: leaving our homes, learning new customs, and exposing

ourselves to complete unknowns. That did not mean, however, that I would have a complete grasp of the varying circumstances that they traveled through. I didn't presume to. But the degree to which the terms of my time abroad differed with theirs was more than I could have imagined. Some chose to leave. Some did not have a choice at all.

How was I to portray the effects of genocide, racial and sexual discrimination, and extreme poverty? These scourges of our world can't be explained with just pretty rhetoric or fluffy metaphors that merely taste good on the tongue. These students are currently breathing these realities. I witnessed firsthand how they wore them on their faces like a scar as well as a badge of honor. When I sat down to write these poems, it wasn't so much a question of "What language do I use?" but "Am I telling their stories justly?"

Conclusion

Ultimately, I have found that the work distilled from this research taps in to emotional vulnerabilities that transcend cultural identity and national origin. From start to finish, I kept in mind that all six of us are all in our early twenties. This particular time in an adult's life is already filled to the brim with change, misdirection, and choices that direct a huge course of our personal development. At the end of all of my interviews, I asked them if they had any regrets. Would they go back and change anything? They all answered to the same effect: not at all. I felt extremely connected with my subjects, having shared that same reckless abandon that saved me many times in Ireland. Establishing that enabled me to dig deep into my transcripts and invest in their stories on an intimate level. After extensive coding of my interview data, I uncovered four motifs that served as the infrastructure of the poems.

- Identity Shift and Choice

I noticed a certain polarity whenever the subject of "I am" was discussed in the interviews. All of the students mentioned to me that they felt a kind of rift inside of themselves; who am I in this place versus who am I at home? Some wondered if the other even existed anymore, if they were something in the middle. This was especially interesting in the case of language. With time, participants whose second language was English defaulted to thinking in English. When it came to thinking about their families or friends at home, they would switch back into thinking in Spanish or French or Arabic. Some modes of expression are not possible in the English language. Not everything has a direct translation. Thus, when trying to explain their emotions or train of thought to me, it became frustrating at times on both sides.

How we would normally interact with our native surroundings is not always applicable to situations that occur in another country. But it's all we have a frame of reference for. I identify with this strongly. The rituals to which I would adhere thus far in my life were ineffective, i.e. studying, self-maintenance, entertainment, social cues, and relationships. Much of the values that I clung tightly to were put under a completely different light when I found that my methods in doing certain things were no longer useful to me. If I wanted to absorb this new place as much as I could, I needed to abandon some of my tendencies. My participants all expressed this phenomenon in their own way. Their words all geared towards the reinventing of oneself. Some were in favor of their changing and others rejected it. We got to know ourselves in ways we did not always ask for.

The concept of choice appeared deeply tied to how they perceived their new world and how they functioned within it. Each choice, as it arose in a variety of situations, seemed to carry much more weight. The risks ran deep with choosing the wrong words to say, choosing the wrong career move, and choosing to reveal too much or too little about oneself. For one student living in India, it even came down to choosing one street food stall over another. I later learned that he contracted a serious digestive illness. Constantly analyzing options produced a cause-and-effect pattern in the responses I received.

Another component of this brand of identity construction is acceptance. If there is anything that was rampant among each of our experiences abroad, it was that engulfing feeling of being an "other". Whether it was the accent in which we spoke, being a racial minority, sexual orientation, being an introvert in a culture of extroverts, something about who we are hadn't quite settled into the mold.

- **Awareness of Time**

This was the least expected trend that threaded itself in the transcripts. Everyone was exceedingly detailed about the very day they left home, the time in between their last visit and the present day, and how much time was left until they could go home. The specificity of time was remarkable, down to the year, month, and day. These dates were precious commodities, a compass by which they would comfort themselves and navigate further. Perhaps a way to count on one thing that is always constant. Time unfolds so gradually when you have these experiences that its not always visible to the naked eye right away. The students expressed a certain ache associated with the time passed, either from a place of nostalgia or anxiety for the future.

With all of the inevitabilities of time in this context, forgetting was present in everyone. We discussed to the tiniest detail the things we began to lose the memory of:

what our favorite foods tasted like, what our bedrooms smelled like, and how the weather felt on our skin. There were times, one of my participants recalled, that she forgot what her own family member's face looked like. Most of the time, the details forgotten seemed inconsequential. But remembering exactly how much time has passed between the last encounter with what we left behind makes those details the most important. Holding on to them in our minds for so long has a tendency to morph them into something else and amalgamate them.

For example, one of the students shared with me the memory of her favorite spot in her family's house back in the US. The far end of her couch in the living room, facing the sunroom and right within earshot of the whole house. Many significant events in her life are mile-stoned by that couch. Now having spent almost a year away from it, she describes it in a much more embellished light.

There is an irony in this work that I cannot ignore. That barrage of eager questions waiting for me when I returned home still have yet to be answered. I realized that I had become the one asking those same impossibly vague questions that really have no final answer. I had been unfair to my participants in that regard. Perhaps the most common element, the nexus of this whole endeavor, is its incompleteness. Each day that these students live in new borders, a new challenge greets them. Something that will revise the responses they shared with me. From this process, I learned to value the very human nature of seeing yourself as a work-in-progress.

The Diver

I:

Growing up nuclear, you touch the hands
of your family, calloused at the age of 5.
Mine were shamefully smooth.
In Trujillo, children were thinkers, the parents were do-ers.
But we all shake hands with hard work daily.

The school's first lessons: the anatomy of hands.
How to press them to pray just so:
to keep the skirts long, tradition down to the fingertips,
the mornings monotonous with the Word of God.
But being born of do-ers, the real education was homemade.

At home, I learned to never feel hungry
I stuffed my brain as my mom stuffed my plate.
She asked, "not hungry, mi hija?"
With two much older siblings, she knew when her babies were full
And when food wasn't enough.

II:

It's been a 1700 day migration
Five years, five cities, and five things
I still have not let go of.
The novellas, the accent, stuffed plates, stuffed minds,
myself. The never-let-go Latina is now

So american, whatever that means.
I didn't give it much thought. It could have meant anything.
Except escape, that wasn't the reason.
Neither here nor there, this and that.
I only had to pick where.

The wide eyes I'd met in that time
always saying, "what a big leap, high dive,
I could never do that!" By now, I understand
those words. But not the could-never, not that fear.
I don't have a word for that back home.

The Revolutionary

At an age, a certain age
we women sit on precipice after precipice
roofs of temporary apartments
X's on dates crossed off since
 fleeing slowing swings in 2009
 speaking to anyone in French, Swahili, Kirundi.

I dapple myself with questions.
Should my toes touch this ground?
Where will I walk next?
How long until I forget the weather, the tastes?
 the pink striped *imvutano* fabric, a dress draped like whispers
 the murdered children whose last words I knew first?

The higher the edge, the more
frequent we ask. But I am silent.
I am just one child.
The more we think, the permission to do so grows
 in the soil
 that asks:

what happened
to the mind of my people
to my divided inheritance
 to my parents,
 killed before hearing my first word,

to the picture in your mind.
why is it always different?

The Wide-Eyed Gazer

Wanderlust is a life of firsts,
easy to fall in love with.

Eager to make your acquaintance with
what you're most unsure of about yourself.

I stood anvil-footed in Westminster Station
Orienteering for hours turned sour in my stomach.

I met my curiosity in Big Ben's smile,
blushed and grateful at the sight.

I've had a taste of this before. Now I own London's flavors and sounds.

When there wasn't a time difference to battle or an ocean to cross,
The far end of the couch at home gave me a periphery I don't have here.
Eyes toward the sunroom, incubating in the heat. The low hum of parental chatter.
It's not unique. But it's where everything happened before these firsts.

London tells me things I don't always know how to listen to,
all the same, I lean on my elbows and absorb
the idyllic, the realistic.
London extends a need to be a part of a city

that scares you, that may not want you, that may reject its transplanted organ.

Places that are pretty in print are my rituals.
The South Bank is a lover on my arm, Hyde Park is my home route.
This city is the honesty of a free afternoon to spend
and the first time I knew how to just be.

The Full Lung

Contradiction inhabits a body. Often, it's your own.
A city is a body with one palm
rooting in a primordial ground.
The other is drawing the stale breath of one million others
pinching their noses at unsavory smells,
some paying no mind at all,
some drowning the ghats in noise and unwritten taboos.

My toes are in the Ganges, mingling with her invisible pollutants.
I asked her for contrast. Purposefully unspecific,
because I hardly know. I wonder if she'd let me have it.
She asks me first, "have you found your breath?
Can you be still among the violent pulse of free-for-all streets,
can you accept your smallness?
I'll give you a departure from what you know.
But not in the way you ask."

But how the hell do I find breath,
when my lungs pool with the scent of cow dung in my alleyway,
and humidity that bends but never breaks?
Stillness has no home in body
my walls vibrate during daily pujas
and fever lays siege in my blood.

In my smallness lives a privilege to call myself minority.
Insignificance is my voice in many,
my freedom to believe ancient ideas in new words.
Only in a city such as this
does one need to be a living contradiction
to master these truths

The Glider

I guess you can say I am always on the run
After nine years, you'd think my legs might grow stronger
take root or wither.

Instead, I've landed over slowly splitting ice
One foot in Iran, in a waning childhood
One foot in America, in a different breed of ignorance.

What would it take to just hover?
More than I own, more than I've left behind.
Limbo does not offer you a visa.

The borders of each of my homes
demand you either claim your skin color
or who your heart leans to.

But you cannot have both.
Almost like I am neither Iranian or American.
but something in between.

I've been looking over each shoulder
squinting my eyes toward the welcome signs
the fine print louder, the welcomes hollow.

It reads, in a frosted smile,
forget your race. forget who you love.
remember, and we can run you aground.

But that's neither here nor there.

I will hover, I will drift

Until I can cross the ice, whole

and without apology.